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IRAN AFFAIR LOOMS LARGE IN HEARING FOR CIA NOMINEE  
BY ROBERT DOHERTY

WASHINGTON (UPI) The Iran arms-Contra aid controversy may provide the Senate Intelligence Committee with a case study to determine if acting CIA Director Robert Gates is qualified to take over the agency permanently.<

The committee scheduled a confirmation hearing today on President Reagan's appointment of Gates to succeed William Casey, who resigned as CIA director this month because of his slow recovery from brain cancer surgery Dec. 18.<

A spokeswoman said the panel hoped that none of today's hearing would have to be a closed session and that one day would be sufficient to question Gates, a career intelligence officer whose CIA assignments have not included covert operations but who took over as acting director when Casey was hospitalized.<

A committee vote on the nomination is not expected for two weeks. If approved by the full Senate, Gates, 43, would be the youngest CIA director ever.<

"I think it's just a question, really, of qualifications more than anything else," a committee aide said Monday. "There's nothing at all that I can see that's earthshaking."<

The aide, who asked not to be identified, noted the role of Gates as Casey's deputy during the CIA's involvement in the sale of U.S. arms to Iran and his response to indications of the diversion of funds to Nicaraguan Contra rebels should provide a "case study" to determine his qualifications.<

The committee will examine whether Gates "was exercising his authority properly" during the controversy and will try to determine if there were "sins of omission or commission" on his part, the aide said.<

Specifically, senators "very definitely" will want to know why Casey told the White House of indications he and Gates received in early October 1986 of a possible diversion of arms sales money to the Contras but did not mention it to the Senate Intelligence Committee during testimony Nov. 21, the aide said. ^ @Attorney General Edwin Meese publicly revealed the Iran-Contra link Nov. 25.<

The Intelligence Committee's recent report on its early investigation into the scandal stated Gates said Casey did not mention the possible diversion Nov. 21 because the agency had only "bits and pieces of information" at that time and the material "was not considered very much to go on."<

But the committee aide said Gates would be asked why, if the information was substantial enough to mention to White House officials, "didn't Casey tell us the same thing?"<

Gates also was likely to be questioned about the decision to keep Congress in the dark about the arms sales for 11 months - a cloak of secrecy ordered by Reagan in writing at Casey's behest - and the larger issue of congressional oversight of intelligence operations.<

Such concerns were heightened last week by a news report that Casey, in testimony initially prepared for the Nov. 21 hearing, intended to mislead lawmakers about the CIA's knowledge of, and role in, the arms sales. The

was revised after Secretary of State George Shultz heard about it and confronted Reagan in the White House Nov. 20, The Washington Post said.<

In a recent interview, Intelligence Committee Chairman David Boren, D-Okla., said he does not favor major changes in laws governing congressional oversight but thinks there must be more trust between the administration and Congress.<

"The way to respond to this is not with another 500-page booklet of rules," Boren said. "I think it's developing an attitude. No. 1 (is) mutual trust."<